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A Case Study of Events and Examples:
History in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

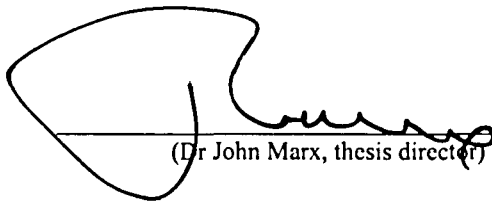
Michelle C. Smith

Honors Thesis
Department of English
University of Richmond

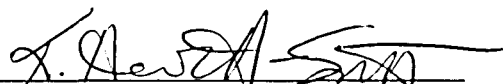
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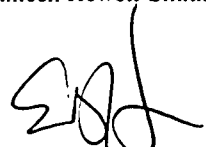
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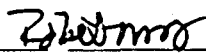
(Dr John Marx, thesis director)



(Dr Kathleen Hewett-Smith, departmental reader)



(Dr Edward Barkin, departmental reader)



(Dr Robert Nelson, English honors coordinator)

At the heart of Arundhati Roy's remarkably popular and critically favored novel *The God of Small Things* is a love story, which begins with a forbidden glance. Ammu, divorced mother of two, outcast daughter of a solidly Anglophilic South Indian bourgeois family, gazes upon the "[c]ontoured and hard," highly "[p]olished" body of Velutha, Paravan carpenter, Untouchable family servant (Roy 167). And Velutha looks back. A small thing, the small thing of the novel's title even, but an occurrence that unravels a family, results in a savage beating, multiple deaths, and a lingering malaise. This novel demands that we ask how such a small thing could come to mean so much, and answering that question, along with unearthing the notion of history that saddles such an occurrence with such heavy symbolic freight, is the goal of this essay.

In order to understand the love affair situated at the novel's center, one needs to consider the history in which it is embedded. That, in turn, means considering the notion of history that authorizes *The God of Small Things*. We may make sense of this by treating Roy's novel as an instance of narrative theory about the historical, and by situating *The God of Small Things* amongst the reigning philosophies of history. To do so is to suggest that fiction still has a good deal to teach us about the world beyond its covers. By refusing to take for granted the importance of any occurrence, especially one as vexed as a forbidden glance between two lovers, Roy's novel demands that we not only consider what sorts of occurrences matter, but also remember that their significance turns on the manner in which they are portrayed. This is a literary problem, to be sure, but it is also a philosophical one.

No philosophy of history worthy of the name avoids the knotty problem of representation. For the strain associated with Marx, representation necessarily falls short of its object. This point of view distinguishes between "the historical origins of the things themselves and that more intangible historicity of the concepts and categories by which we attempt to understand those

things” (Jameson 9). Representation skews reality, and leaves readers to decode writing that buries history underneath its beguiling surface. This understanding of history is often attributed to Karl Marx, who declares that real basis for ideas in the world lies in the economic realm. Marx claims that societal change results from changes in the relations of material production. Pre-capitalist societies were classless and agrarian, but along with new ways of producing goods, the means of exploiting workers developed as well, which marked the rise of class structure and capitalism. The engine of capitalist history is class struggle: the conflict between workers and owners must, Marx argues, result in working class consciousness that precipitates revolution. Such revolutionary consciousness is as much the product of exploitation as the account of the world circulated by owners and financiers. Marx’s thesis that ideas emerge out of relations of production is one of his most germane legacies for literary analysis:

“In contrast to German philosophy which descends from heaven to earth, here we ascend from earth to heaven... men, developing their material production and their material intercourse, alter, along with this their real existence, their thinking and the products of their thinking. Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life” (Marx 11).

Marx claims that ideas and beliefs develop out of social structures and the material conditions they create, rather than the other way around. Any truly Marxist act of reading, therefore, makes it a priority to detect the structure that enabled a given text. History is reflected in writing, in other words, but is not “in” writing per se. As Jameson explains, the real work of literary analysis is “in detecting the traces of that uninterrupted narrative, in restoring to the surface of the text the repressed and buried reality of this fundamental history” (Jameson 20).

A second theory proposes that what is on the surface is as real as history gets. Depth is just another effect of rhetoric. The representation of a thing or idea is what constitutes that thing or idea. History, in this model, is not comprised of the material relations of production, but of discourse; all ideas and concepts are constructs with their own histories. There is no layer of truth

beneath representation, which means that representations have the power to change not only the ways that society defines certain concepts but also society itself. Foucault explains the power of discourse and the ways that different constructs change over time in his work on sexuality. In “The Repressive Hypothesis”, Foucault contends that by requiring sexual deviants to “confess” and focusing so much official attention on sexual deviance, society revealed its true obsession. Sexuality blossomed as discourse concerning it was sanctioned by those in power in the name of repression; “‘sexuality’ is far more of a positive product of power than power was ever repression of sexuality” (Foucault 62).

The theory of history that Roy introduces through her novel is neither strictly Marxist nor strictly Foucaultian, but in many ways a synthesis of the two. With Marx it shares a conviction that class struggle matters. With Foucault it shares a sense of the importance of sexuality. In this, the novel appears friendly to Foucault’s notion of what sort of raw material counts as historical. For Foucault, history happens in the margins, in the details of day to day interaction, and this is echoed in the novel’s insistence on the relevance of small things. However, Roy does not discount the centrality of class and caste in the world of Ayemenem. Indeed, caste distinction is at the very root of the forbidden love affair, which is forbidden because Velutha is an Untouchable. The love story symbolizes Roy’s synthesis of Marxist and Foucaultian ideology precisely because it is a picture of how class conflict is pertinent to the personal love affair. If Foucault and Marx try to make the private realm of the day to day completely discrete from the public realm of relations of production, Roy shows how interlocked and interdependent these two spheres of existence truly are.

The notion of Roy’s theory of history as a synthesis of Marx and Foucault applies in regard to personal agency as well. Marx would argue that your class determines the direction of your life as well as your understanding of it, that the individual doesn’t matter at all except as a member of a

particular class. Foucault, on the other hand, is of the opinion that the distinctions set up by discourse—"sane" or "insane", "healthy" or "sick", "perverted" or "normal"—are what generate your perception of yourself and predispose you towards certain decisions and actions. Once again, Roy offers a polite nod to these arguments, acknowledging the assistance that each can offer while ultimately painting her own unique portrait of human agency. Roy concedes the importance of class by detailing how members of all castes and classes react with uniform shock and disgust to the unveiling of Velutha and Ammu's love affair. In response to Foucault's notion of the importance of discourses, constructs with histories and lives of their own, the novel names "History", with a capital H, as a force with its own agency in the novel. This has two main effects: it seriously constrains the agency of the characters, but it also makes this History fallible. History, as a force, makes mistakes in this novel, and thus allows things to happen as a result of the agency of human beings. While History dominates human interaction, providing rules and regulations and meting out punishments when those rules are broken, Roy's personified History is not omniscient, and is dependent upon humans to get things done. In *The God of Small Things*, characters are bribed into working for History. They appear as "History's henchmen," and play roles that seem written for them by some absent force. This feature bears more detailed commentary, which I provide in the course of my reading. As much as Roy's novel asks how we ought to define occurrences, we might also say that it asks how we should understand the social ordinances that appear to constrain human behavior.

Through a demonstration of Roy's inclusion of both Marxist and Foucaultian notions of history, I've shown how the novel's theory of history raises issues about what kinds of occurrences are historical, and what kinds of agency human beings have within this theory of history. I would argue that in this novel Roy is postulating that history happens in everyday occurrences, and that

human beings have agency in these occurrences; put bluntly, human beings can effect history in their day to day lives. Appropriately, Roy attempts to make this point through the central occurrence of this novel: the love story of Ammu and Velutha. Their love is personal and comes out of the day to day interactions of human beings. If Roy can prove that this love is doing something new, something radical and historical, and that the characters themselves brought this about, then she is successful.

In order to determine how we should consider the love between Velutha and Ammu, I will supplement the terms of Foucault and Marx with the philosophy of Alain Badiou, who defines an event as something which changes one's understanding of the world and thus is of revolutionary and historical importance. Badiou's theory seems well-fitted to deal with the questions of agency and change that Roy raises with the portrayal of Ammu and Velutha's love as sparked by a subtle yet momentous glance. It is clear that Badiou's world is not made up only of events, and for clarity's sake I will refer to the occurrences that might look like events but do not effect the kind of change that Badiou describes as 'examples'. My return to Foucault later in the essay will clarify why I chose this specific term. After fully defining my terms I will describe the moment when Velutha and Ammu fall in love and explain what about that moment makes their love seem like an event, in Badiou's sense. Next, I will explain the response to Velutha and Ammu's love, which amounts to a punishment effected by History and its agents. Paradoxically, the methodical and effective punishment of Velutha and Ammu makes their love resemble more a violation of laws and norms—an example—than something revolutionary and new—an event. I will explain how if an occurrence like their love is successfully contained, it seems to argue that this is an example, not an event. Finally, I will make an argument for my own verdict on whether this love affair is a radical event, an illustration of human agency in daily life, or a typical example of what happens

when one disobeys the social laws of a society.

Part One: Events and Examples

I will begin my analysis of *The God of Small Things* with the definition of an event offered by Alain Badiou in his work *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*. Badiou characterizes events as something which bring about “a new way of being” (Badiou 41). Michel Foucault refers to events in a somewhat similar way when he claims that

“an event, consequently, is not a decision, a treaty, a reign, or a battle, but the reversal of a relationship of forces, the usurpation of power, the appropriation of a vocabulary turned against those who had once used it, a feeble domination that poisons itself as it grows lax, the entry of a masked ‘other’” (Foucault 88).

For Foucault, events are changes in who wields power over whom. In contrast, Badiou’s events include not only the French Revolution, but also things as small in scale as falling in love. While love and revolution seem very different, Badiou claims that each can precipitate significant change in the way individuals see their world. Events are both situated and supplementary, both in the situation and detached from all the rules of the situation, thus incomprehensible without a systemic shift to the new way of being.

The second part of Badiou’s argument addresses the aftermath of an event. As Badiou explains, the new way of being cannot be automatically adopted; rather, you must choose to be faithful to the event. Fidelity to an event requires that the way you live must change, but it is possible to take part in an event and still refuse to change your way of life, which may be easier than adopting a “new way of being”. Badiou calls acting in accordance with the new ideas produced by the event “evental fidelity” (Badiou 42). “An evental fidelity is a real break (both thought and practiced) in the specific order within which the event took place (be it political, loving, artistic or scientific...)” (Badiou 42). Finally, Badiou also explains how the process of

fidelity to an event produces new subjects. In the case of a romantic event, “the lovers as such enter into the composition of one loving subject, who exceeds them both. In the same way, the subject of a revolutionary politics is not the individual militant... it is a singular production, which has taken different names (sometimes ‘Party’, sometimes not)” (Badiou 43).

Badiou’s discussion of events moves on quickly to the next step without accounting for occurrences in the world that do not constitute events. Badiou is interested in ideas, beliefs, and truth, and does not concern himself with more mundane daily encounters. However, he is clearly not arguing that everything in life is an event. In contrast to the sudden sweeping away of the past understanding of a situation that comprises an event are the ordinary sorts of occurrences that do not challenge the laws of a time. These occurrences I will term examples, because they demonstrate the rules and the understanding already in place. Examples account for the majority of daily occurrences, and, unlike events, do not result in significant change.

For Badiou, the distinction between an event and an example is that an event drastically changes the way people see the world and their place in it. Examples, on the other hand, may seem large and important but do not allow for people to have any affect on how they understand their lives. It is a difficult and critical task to distinguish between these sorts of occurrences. Difficult, because it’s hard to know whether an occurrence really changes the way that someone sees the world. It is quite possible for something to look like an event that is nevertheless supportive of the current structure of society. Furthermore, it is hard to see how an event that changes the world for one person impacts society as a whole. Events cannot be as consequential as Badiou claims if they only affect people internally, and therefore, individually. This is why fidelity to the event matters, and it is where human agency is quintessential for Badiou’s understanding of how events change the world. If people cannot have the agency needed to change their way of life, then they cannot be

true to events, and cannot effect actual change. If Roy can depict a personal event to which the subjects are faithful, then she has succeeded in offering a model of how humans make history in their day to day lives.

Part Two: The Case for Forbidden Love as Event

The moment in *The God of Small Things* that looks most like an event is the afternoon when Velutha and Ammu exchange glances. While a seemingly insignificant act, this glance allows each of them to truly recognize the other. This occurrence takes place outside the house, as the family and the factory workers gather to welcome Sophie Mol and Margaret Kochamma. Ammu watches Velutha play with her daughter and toss her onto his shoulders, and realizes that “she hoped that it had been him that Rahel saw in the march... that under his careful cloak of cheerfulness he housed a living breathing anger against the smug, ordered world that she so raged against” (Roy 166). Here Ammu recognizes Velutha as a man capable of deep feelings, and perhaps as a man rebellious enough to act on passion. Seconds later she marvels at “her daughter’s physical ease with him... Ammu recognized vaguely that her thoughts were shot with a delicate purple tinge of envy. She didn’t allow herself to consider who it was that she envied. The man or her own child” (Roy 167). When Velutha catches her gaze he too undergoes a transformation in the way he sees Ammu, “For instance, he saw that Rahel’s mother was a woman” (Roy 168).

This glance resembles an event in that it violates the laws of the time, known in the novel as the love laws. Velutha falls in love as he realizes that Ammu is more than her name, which literally means ‘mother’. Throughout the novel we have seen Ammu struggling with her own identity as a woman and a mother, and the exchanged look with Velutha reveals the hidden side of her. This other Ammu is described earlier;

“When Ammu listened to songs that she loved on the radio, something stirred inside her. A liquid ache spread under her skin, and she walked out of the world like a witch... On days like this there was something restless and untamed about her. As though she had temporarily set aside the morality of motherhood and divorcee-hood. Even her walk changed from a safe mother-walk to another wilder sort of walk” (Roy 43).

The occurrence takes place when Velutha sees past the cloak of motherhood to the mysterious, restless woman underneath. Janet Thormann asserts that “what plays out in Ammu is the conflict between woman as mother, regulated by social law, and woman as subject of desire following her own jouissance” (Thormann 8). But I would argue that while this conflict between mother and subject of desire may begin inside Ammu, it is most definitely “played out” externally, in Velutha’s moment of recognition and the couple’s decision to act on their love and to break the love laws. If this is an event, then Velutha and Ammu are decidedly faithful to it. Velutha does not pretend he doesn’t know that Ammu is a woman capable of giving him gifts of her own, nor does Ammu avoid the recognition of her desire. They accept this knowledge and act on it, meeting on the riverbank later that evening to consummate their newfound love. Badiou explains that events are both situated and supplementary. This occurrence meets that requirement as well, because it happens within the setting of the *Welcome Home, Our Sophie Mol* play, but cannot be understood within the social system, in which Velutha is a Paravan and Ammu a daughter of a Touchable family, and her glancing over at him has no particular meaning whatsoever.

Finally, the occurrence that takes place between Ammu and Velutha offers a hypothesis for the relationship between History and events. Roy’s History, as I described earlier, is capable of making mistakes, and Ammu and Velutha do seem to slip through its fingers here. History is surprised by what happens between Ammu and Velutha: “Madness slunk in through a chink in History” (Roy 204). When their eyes meet, “centuries telescoped into one evanescent moment. History was wrong-footed, caught off guard” (Roy 167). While we have yet to look at the

relationship between History and examples, it is clear that History is against this possible event, that is, against the reinterpretation of its laws by human beings. The characterization of this occurrence is as something that no one wanted to happen, that only took place because Velutha and Ammu were in the same place at the same time and suddenly saw each other differently. The characters are not in History's grasp at this moment and this allows them to reconfigure their worlds. The moment when Velutha and Ammu exchange glances resembles Badiou's definition of an event and supports my argument that what Roy is trying to prove possible in this novel is human agency to enact change in day to day life. If this man and this woman can, through a simple glance, change the world, then humans are not merely affected by historical change, but enactors of it.

While Velutha and Ammu offer the best picture of a possible event, there is another occurrence in the novel that fits Badiou's description of fidelity to an event. This occurrence is the betrayal of Velutha. The novel depicts how Estha is bullied into betraying Velutha by Baby Kochamma, and the way in which this moment reshapes the course of his life. One explanation of Estha's decision to stop speaking is that Estha is attempting to redeem himself by being faithful to the event that his betrayal constitutes for him. Badiou tells us that faithfulness to an event requires that there be a break in system for which the event took place and that the way the subject of the event lives in that system must change. This possible event occurs in the system of speech:

"The Inspector asked his question. Estha's mouth said Yes.
Childhood tiptoed out.
Silence slid in like a bolt" (Roy 303).

Clearly this is a momentous occasion. With one word Estha exits his childhood and enters his adult life as a mute. Janet Thormann offers a psychoanalytic reading of this event; "he [Estha] is thrust into Hamlet's dilemma, enjoined to authorize the murder of his mother's lover, the one taking the place of the father... Estha's complicity with the Other as a child causes his rejection of speech as

an adult” (Thormann 6). However, an examination of Estha’s betrayal in terms of events highlights the way in which Estha’s attitude towards language changes after the power of his language is demonstrated. When Estha says “yes”, he knows he is lying, yet his spoken word has the clout to finalize Velutha’s betrayal. The rules of speech change for Estha as the capability of his words is so horribly demonstrated.

Estha’s contemplation of speech eventually convinces him that the dangers of speaking outweigh the advantages. While Estha doesn’t stop speaking right away, he does become more attentive to his words. When Rahel and Ammu are saying goodbye to Estha at the train station, Estha asks Ammu when she will come to bring him home. She tells him that she will come as soon as she finds work and he replies, “But that will be never!” He goes on to examine his words and their power:

“By “never” Estha had only meant that it would be too far away. That it wouldn’t be now, wouldn’t be soon. By “never” he hadn’t meant, Not Ever. But that’s how the words came out... And that’s how it had all turned out. Never. Not ever. It was his fault that the faraway man in Ammu’s chest stopped shouting. His fault that she died alone in the lodge with no one to lie at the back of her and talk to her. Because he was the one that had said it. But Ammu that will be never!” (Roy 308).

When the train starts up Estha speaks his last phrase, “Ammu! Feeling vomity!”, and begins to wail pitifully. As the train pulls away he leaves his voice behind forever. Estha certainly changes his way of life when he realizes the power of his words, and creates a literal break in the system of verbal speech and sound as he stops speaking altogether.

There is a second way in which the betrayal of Velutha resembles Badiou’s definition of an event. Badiou declares that events create new subjects and, in the wake of the betrayal, Estha, Rahel, and Ammu show how the formation of a new subject through fidelity to an event might work. Their new subjectivity is based in shared guilt and loss, “all three of them bonded by the certain, separate knowledge that they had loved a man to death” (Roy 307). In the end, Ammu

abandons her children in her grief; Velutha “left behind a Hole in the Universe through which darkness poured like liquid rat. Through which their mother followed without even turning to wave goodbye” (Roy 182). Throughout their lives, Estha and Rahel have been connected to one another mentally, and this doesn’t change, but the essence of their shared existence is transformed from two halves of a whole happy childhood to two halves of a haunted adulthood. Estha lapses into silence, and though Rahel speaks, her eyes and manner are vacant. While everyone finds the adult twins frustrating and mysterious, no one realizes “[t]hat the emptiness in one twin was only a version of the quietness of the other. That the two things fitted together. Like stacked spoons” (Roy 20-1). Later, when the twins make love as reunited adults, they do so more to combine the two halves of their grief, shame, and horror at the past than out of lust or physical passion. “But what was there to say? Only that there were tears. Only that Quietness and Emptiness fitted together like stacked spoons ... Only that they held each other close, long after it was over. Only that what they shared that night was not happiness, but hideous grief” (Roy 311). The younger generation takes up the family tradition, and the love laws are violated once more.

Part Three: The Response of History and History’s Hench(wo)men

The force that Roy dubs “History” works through examples, not events, to reproduce and enforce conformity to society’s laws. It doesn’t take History long to realize that something is amiss in Ayemenem; the punishment for Velutha and Ammu’s love is enacted soon, and functions smoothly and effectively. History’s punishments, while devastating, are not events, but examples, exertions of systems of power already in place. History keeps the books and inevitably collects from those who have built up a debt of disobedience to the laws. The punishment of Velutha and Ammu is described in terms of business; “History used the back verandah to negotiate its terms and

collect its dues” (Roy 190). History’s examples not only punish disobedience, but also support society’s drive towards order and classification. Ammu and Velutha make the fateful decision to disregard the ordering of their world when they come together as lovers. The Terror is necessary; an example must be made: “a history lesson for future offenders” (Roy 318). History’s punishments are examples of order functioning as it should, whether in the day to day conformity of the majority of society or the punishing of non-conformists through more painful examples.

The style of the punishments reinforces the notion that these are a different kind of occurrence than the instant when Velutha and Ammu fall in love. Examples don’t need to be swift, they have the power employed by History and the plodding weight of societal norms and rules behind them; they can do their work in the open without fear of being constrained. Those who fall prey to History’s punishing examples fall prey, as David Punter explains, “to a war-machine, an apparatus of terror that has no regard for individual subjectivity, that grinds on regardless” (Punter 199). Sophie Mol’s death is just such an example, and is extremely anticlimactic in comparison to the cataclysmic description of the occurrence between Ammu and Velutha. While the death of Sophie Mol is a horrific tale of coincidence run amuck, her passing is described in the neutral terms of a business transaction. The drowning of Sophie Mol is “a quiet handing-over ceremony. A boat spilling its cargo. A river accepting the offering” (Roy 277). The beating of Velutha is markedly grotesque yet similarly dispassionate, leaving the twins awed by “the absence of caprice in what the policemen did. The abyss where anger should have been. The sober, steady brutality, the economy of it all” (Roy 292). This description of “History in live performance” emphasizes the immutable nature of Roy’s History, which registers violations and metes out punishment without any recognition of the personal suffering involved.

History’s punishments cannot be enacted without the aid of humans. History’s henchmen

are in all quarters of society, and their day to day actions provide the current of power for the functioning of History's machine. While the love laws may appear to exist on a grand scale, they operate in more discreet ways. Baby Kochamma, Comrade Pillai, Inspector Thomas Mathew, and the police all offer their own contributions to help bring about Velutha's death and betrayal. Furthermore, each of these characters or groups is working on behalf of History because of the power that History offers in return for their agency.

The policemen are government employees; their job in this case is to punish Velutha and put him in his place. They are in the business of History, in the name of the law. As Foucault explains, "[t]he law is a calculated and relentless pleasure, delight in the promised blood, which permits the perpetual instigation of new dominations and the staging of meticulously repeated scenes of violence" (Foucault 85). The policemen love their job because it gives them the opportunity to exert power to keep the world running "smoothly". They imagine the headlines that will herald their courage: six brave men sneak into crazed rapist/kidnapper's den. When they beat Velutha they are putting him in his place for having the audacity to be asleep while they planned their silent attack, "making nonsense of all that Touchable cunning" (Roy 291). The beating of Velutha is dispassionate and impersonal because the policemen need to believe that they are doing this because it is their job, not out of pleasure. Nevertheless, Roy makes it clear that they lust to exert their power over this powerless man who had the nerve to break the rules, something inconceivable to them. They are motivated by "feelings of contempt born of inchoate, unacknowledged fear... Man's subliminal urge to destroy what he could neither subdue nor deify. Men's Needs" (Roy 292). These policemen are what keep the machine of History running smoothly.

While the policemen physically exert their power over Velutha and use him to represent the

power of their position as celebrated law enforcers over his position as outcast, sinful law-breaker, Comrade Pillai is motivated less by Velutha's caste or crime than by considerations of his own desires and schemes. Nonetheless, he also joins in the punishment of Velutha in exchange for an increase in power, political power in this case. Pillai reasons that if he denies Velutha the protection of the Communist Party, then when Velutha is attacked by the police it will be easy to make it look like Velutha was attacked for being Communist. This, in turn, will provide both the tinder for his Communist revolt and rid him of Velutha, an unfortunate stumbling block to enlisting the rest of the pickle factory employees, because they envy his status with the family. The novel asks the reader to forgive Pillai for helping to send Velutha to his death, blaming History instead; "[t]o be fair to Comrade Pillai, he did not plan the course of events that followed. He merely slipped his ready fingers into History's waiting glove" (Roy 267). This passage again emphasizes the paradox that Comrade Pillai chooses to put his hand in History's glove, the implication being that this act entails a willful surrendering of agency, a surrender motivated by the promise of political power. Pillai understands the world and sees the larger picture in a way that the policemen don't want or need to. Pillai and Inspector Mathew grasp that granting History a portion of their agency increases their power and prestige. They both comprehend and cooperate with the system, and are

"men without curiosity. Without doubt. Both in their own way truly, terrifyingly adult. They looked out at the world and never wondered how it worked, because they knew. They worked it. They were mechanics who serviced different parts of the same machine" (Roy 248).

Though politics is officially Comrade Pillai's realm, Inspector Mathew knows enough to be concerned to hear that Velutha is a member of the Communist Party. After Pillai assures him that "Velutha did not have the patronage or the protection of the Communist Party. That he was on his own" (Roy 248), the Inspector sees no obstacle to concluding the case neatly. Like the policemen,

he is dedicated to order, though his place in the hierarchy of History's henchmen is to fit various pieces into a whole rather than to carry out one small task within that larger scheme. When he discovers "that what the Paravan had taken from the Touchable Kingdom had not been snatched, but given" (Roy 246), he is deeply disturbed and takes it upon himself, not to clear Velutha's name, but to shame Ammu for what she did and remind her how grateful she should be that the truth wasn't publicized. When Inspector Mathew taps Ammu's breasts with his baton, "he knew exactly what he was doing. It was a premeditated gesture, calculated to humiliate and terrorize her. An attempt to instill order into a world gone wrong" (Roy 246). Preserving order is History's goal, and when Ammu surprises him with her lack of shame, he responds accordingly, by trying to drill that shame into her.

Baby Kochamma offers the most complete picture of how History recruits its workers, in this case by turning a violator of the laws into a powerful agent of enforcement. Falling in love with Father Mulligan at the age of eighteen may have been the sort of occurrence for Baby that falling in love with Velutha was for Ammu. Baby ignores the rule that she cannot be the lover of a priest, and pursues Father Mulligan wholeheartedly, even becoming a nun in order to get closer to him. Though she is eventually forced to move back home with her family, Baby never stops loving Father Mulligan, and writes to him every evening in her diary. "Father Mulligan's death did not alter the text of the entries in Baby Kochamma's diary, simply because as far as she was concerned it did not alter his availability. If anything, she possessed him in death in a way that she never had while he was alive" (Roy 282).

After the failure of her bold attempts to consummate her love, Baby contemplates her options and decides to surrender to the rules and norms of her society in return for the kinds of power that History can offer. The laws of family and gender dictate that unmarried women who

come back to live in their family homes should act unendingly meek and grateful. Baby adorns herself with the proper external attitude, gives up her wild ways, and acquires a new, powerful position in the family and in society as a result. Ammu is in a similar spot, though has even lower standing than Baby because she first married against her family's wishes and then had the gall to file for divorce. However, Ammu doesn't trade her dignity for familial or social standing, and it is for this that Baby "resented Ammu, because she saw her quarreling with a fate that she, Baby Kochamma herself, felt she had graciously accepted. The fate of the wretched Man-less woman" (Roy 44-5). Ammu outwardly rebels against her place in things, when she should be even more meek and chastened than Baby, and Baby feels bitter and threatened by Ammu and her twins, who live freely, disregarding the norms of society.

Baby Kochamma's motivation is less to instill order or to advance her own political position than to subjugate Ammu, to punish her for her disobedience to the laws concerning woman's place in society. Ammu is disobedient in the domestic sphere, which is the locus of Baby's power. Baby feels superior to Ammu and wants a sign that she has done the right thing in the form of a punishment for Ammu, though she would say self-righteously that that wasn't up to her to decide. Baby downplays her importance in bringing about the example, using her religion as a shield of moral propriety. When the affair between Ammu and Velutha is unveiled, Baby "recognized at once the immense potential of the situation, but immediately anointed her thoughts with unctuous oils. She bloomed. She saw it as God's Way of punishing Ammu" (Roy 243). However, it wasn't God's Way, it was "human history, masquerading as God's Purpose" (Roy 293). Baby is not working as God's agent, but rather, as History's.

Baby's power is distinctive in the novel, though all the forms of power are alike in that they are granted by History in return for obedience and cooperation. While the men have the

institutional power of politics and government, Baby's institution is the home. What she has is the power of the domestic woman, defined and described by Nancy Armstrong in her work, *Desire and Domestic Fiction*. According to Armstrong, the domestic woman's power is:

“...a new form of political power. This power emerged with the rise of the domestic woman and established its hold over British culture through her dominance over all those objects and practices we associate with private life. To her went authority over the household, leisure time, courtship procedures, and kinship relations” (Armstrong 3).

Along with the rise of the domestic woman comes a change in what is valued in women, according to Armstrong; “of the female alone did it [domestic fiction] presume to say that neither birth nor the accoutrements of title and status accurately represented the individual”. Rather, any consideration of women now “attached precise moral value to certain qualities of mind” (Armstrong 4). Baby Kochamma is a domestic woman and has the formidable power that this entails, and she knows it. By staying in the family home and piously fulfilling her proper role she exemplifies the moral qualities that Armstrong claims give the domestic woman her power.

From the moment she learns that Vellya Paapen is at the door confessing, Baby uses her domestic power to urge along the events of the Terror; “[s]he set sail at once. A ship of goodness ploughing through a sea of sin” (Roy 243). She takes charge of the situation, telling Mammachi, “it must be true... she’s quite capable of it. And so is he. Vellya Paapen would not lie” (Roy 243). She has Kochu Maria bring chairs and drinks and convinces the other women to see it her way: “[t]hey did what they had to do, the two old ladies. Mammachi provided the passion. Baby Kochamma the Plan. Kochu Maria was their midget lieutenant” (Roy 244). Like the Inspector, using Kochu Maria as he uses the policemen, Baby plans the domestic side of the Terror. When Velutha comes to talk to Mammachi, Baby “said nothing, but used her hands to modulate Mammachi’s fury, to stoke it anew. An encouraging pat on the back. A reassuring arm around the shoulders. Mammachi was completely unaware of the manipulation” (Roy 268). As long as she’s

at Mammachi's side, Velutha doesn't stand a chance.

Baby plays a large role in two more aspects of the Terror. Inspector Mathew meets with her again after he's found out the truth:

"The children said that they had gone of their own volition. Their boat had capsized and the English girl had drowned by accident. Which left the police saddled with the Death in Custody of a technically innocent man. True, he was a Paravan. True, he had misbehaved. But these were troubled times" (Roy 298).

The Inspector tells Baby that either Ammu must file a complaint or the children must identify Velutha as their abductor, or he will be forced to press charges against her for lying when she submitted the case. Baby doesn't fail to rise to the occasion, telling the twins that they have murdered their cousin and that if she tells the police the truth both they and Ammu will go to jail. She creates this story as the twins sit spellbound, "fascinated by the story she was telling them. Then what happened?" (Roy 300). As the domestic woman, her power over her younger relatives allows her to manipulate them through their own personal relationships; she knows that the way to control them is to offer a choice between needlessly sticking up for Velutha (who according to Baby is going to die anyway), or accompanying their mother to jail. She spoke "[a]s though she was offering them a choice of two treats. Fishing or bathing the pigs? Bathing the pigs or fishing? The twins looked up at her. Not together (but almost) two frightened voices whispered, 'Save Ammu'" (Roy 302).

Baby's domestic power allows her to subtly manipulate Mammachi, strengthening her anger and resolve, and to entrap the twins, knowing how to use both guilt and love to get them to betray Velutha. Baby's final job in the Terror is to get rid of Ammu.

"She managed that by doing what she was best at. Irrigating her fields, nourishing her crops with other people's passions. She gnawed like a rat into the godown of Chacko's grief. Within its walls she planted an easy, accessible target for his insane anger... Chacko breaking down doors was only the sad bull thrashing at the end of Baby Kochamma's

leash” (Roy 305).

What Baby is “best at”, as the domestic woman, is manipulating emotions and passions, the elements that reign in the private sphere of family relations.

Baby Kochamma, Comrade Pillai, the policemen, and Inspector Mathew teach us that History grants power to those who conform to its laws, and it is those people in positions of power who punish the nonconformists. Similarly, those who break the laws do not have power, and thus are easily punished. In *The God of Small Things* we see the punishment of a family who would not follow the love laws. Just as those with power enforce the laws, it is only those with power who can make new laws. In *The German Ideology*, Marx argues that the ruling class produces rules that support their position of power;

“the class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production... the ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which make the one class the ruling one, therefore, the ideas of its dominance” (Marx 33).

While Roy’s novel seems to punish those who do not belong to the ruling class, Baby Kochamma and the others teach us that your power in society is determined more by your willingness to obey and play your role than your inherited social status. Here again we see Roy admit that class makes a difference, but argue that ultimately it is conformity that grants power in society, not class.

The victims of the tale are a mother, her children, and an Untouchable, and they are uniformly powerless as the Terror approaches. The children go against society’s laws, as Thormann argues, out of ignorance; they “as children have minimal awareness of and control over the rules of their culture” (Thormann 7). While Velutha and Ammu know society’s laws, they have forfeited any power by filling the role of deviant. Even as an Untouchable, Velutha might have found access to power through the Communist party, but he loses his political standing because he

does not live like the other Untouchables. Most Untouchables are not allowed to have such direct contact with their Touchable employers, but Velutha is the only one who can operate the factory, and this position, while necessary for the family pickle business, is not his allotted place in life.

Ammu, on the other hand, is the daughter of a good family but forfeits her power by marrying and then divorcing an outsider, and again by acting discontent in her station upon her return to Ayemenem. C. Oumhani argues another variation of this theme, which is that because the twins, Velutha, and Ammu have no real power or status in society, they're hoping that their place on the fringe of society will keep anyone from noticing or caring if they do break the rules, referring to "their efforts to escape to a periphery where they could live according to different laws" (Oumhani 89). However, I would argue that their lack of power results from their nonconformity, not their nonconformity from their lack of power.

The characters' awareness of their lack of power, of agency, is the base for the novel's focus on big things and small things. Chacko laments that "[o]ur sorrows will never be sad enough. Our joys never happy enough. Our dreams never big enough. Our lives never important enough. To matter" (Roy 52). While Chacko seems to be speaking for all of India, the other characters feel insignificant not in a cultural or national sense, but in a distinctly personal one. In this novel, as Thormann points out, "global inequality is aligned with the local inequalities that determine and limit the possibilities and choices of the characters" (Thormann 6). One way that this theme manifests itself is a sense that the big things are too much for the characters to deal with, that the small things are all they can handle. Throughout their love affair Ammu and Velutha "knew that there was nowhere for them to go. They had nothing. No future. So they stuck to the small things" (Roy 320). Ammu and Velutha seem to sense that History can come for them at any time to punish them for breaking the rules; they can't change the rules for anyone but themselves and, ultimately,

they can't control their own lives. The lovers worry that their love might not be an event that changes things, but rather a violation to be contained. They feel frail and vulnerable in their love and equate their situation with that of a spider who camouflages himself with bits of garbage. There is a sense of hopelessness in the face of the structure and power that enforces social law, and while the humans can catch a break when History's back is turned, they're sure to pay for it in the end.

The punishment in this novel is effected without any real glitches. The society seems totally prepared at all levels to deal with Velutha and Ammu's disobedience and nonconformity. The routine manner of the punishment suggests that Velutha and Ammu's love might itself be a day to day sort of occurrence, with a scripted response to distribute the proper punishment. Can this be an event that can only be understood outside the system if the system is so well-prepared to deliver the example of the Terror in response?

Part Four: The Case for Forbidden Love as Example

I have offered one interpretation of Ammu and Velutha's love as an event that goes against the social laws and norms of their society, thus creating new ways of understanding that society. However, it cannot be argued that societies do not allow for any violations of their laws, which suggests that it may not always be revolutionary to break the laws. The novel considers both sides of this dilemma, first presenting the love as crucial and radically new, and then showing how well the structures of power that are in place work to squash this violation back down again. In this section I will examine evidence that might suggest that Velutha and Ammu's love is a simple example reinforcing the power structure by proving that violations are punished. I will begin with the theory behind the argument for Velutha and Ammu's love as example, using mainly Foucault,

who argues that discourse defines types of violations; in this light, Ammu and Velutha could be classified within the system as violators.

As I mentioned in my explanation of Badiou's event, Foucault's work also discusses events. While Foucault's definition of an event resembles Badiou's in that an event involves changing ideas, for Foucault something is an event only when the subordinated group usurps the discourse, the ideas, of the dominant group. In other words, power must change hands. To illustrate this distinction: Foucault and Badiou would both define the French Revolution as an event, but for different reasons. Badiou would claim that this is an event because thousands of people shifted the way that they understood the world. Conversely, this is an event for Foucault because power changed hands; the revolution was "the reversal of a relationship of forces, the usurpation of power, the appropriation of a vocabulary turned against those who had once used it" (Foucault 88). Foucault would not see Velutha and Ammu's love as an event because power was not exchanged; they were powerless at the beginning and they were powerless at the end.

Furthermore, Foucault would argue that Velutha and Ammu's love is not something outside the system of their society, as Badiou claims an event must be. According to Foucault, society allows and even welcomes violations of norms like the love laws. Society creates norms and laws so that it may exert power over those who break them; punishment is a form of control, and therefore, violating those laws serves not as a rebellion against those in power but as testimony to their power. The creation of norms and laws begins with differentiations between people that serve to elevate the status of one group and lower that of another. Next, "[t]he domination of certain men over others leads to the differentiation of values" (Foucault 85). This is Foucault's account for how social norms, like the love laws, come into being. In fact, one of Foucault's main examples of how power finds new ways to exert itself is the creation of the notion of sexual deviance. Foucault

describes how in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the public interest in sexuality moved from a focus on married sexuality to so-called deviant sexuality:

“what came under scrutiny was the sexuality of children, mad men and women, and criminals; the sensuality of those who did not like the opposite sex ... It was time for all these figures, scarcely noticed in the past, to step forward and speak, to make the difficult confession of what they were ... if regular sexuality happened to be questioned once again, it was through a reflux movement, originating in these peripheral sexualities. Whence the setting apart of the “unnatural” as a specific dimension in the field of sexuality” (Foucault 319).

In this sense, the sexual desire between Ammu and Velutha is not a violation of the setup of the society, but an integral part of it. Badiou claims that events create a break in the system and can’t be understood within the system as it was before the event, but in this light it seems that violations are allowed for and even desirable. In summary, Foucault’s theory would lead us to argue that Velutha and Ammu’s love makes complete sense within their society as a sexually deviant act between people of different castes and is not revolutionary at all, but rather, business as usual.

An ensuing portion of Foucault’s analysis explains that discourses like sexuality and mental health create classifications within these concepts that allow power to exert itself to punish that which is classified as abnormal. In the “Preface to The History of Sexuality, Volume II”, Foucault describes this process:

“in Western societies, a complex experience is constituted from and around certain forms of behavior: an experience which conjoins a field of study (*connaissance*) (with its own concepts, theories, diverse disciplines), a collection of rules (which differentiate the permissible from the forbidden, natural from monstrous, normal from pathological, what is decent from what is not, etc.), a mode of relations between the individual and himself (which enables him to recognize himself as a sexual subject amid others)” (Foucault 334).

Here classification as normal or deviant is not, as is often argued, based in fact and observation and truth, but purely a result of the shifting nature of discourse. Concepts like truth, history, sexuality, and mental health all have histories with their own rules and classifications that have developed and altered over time.

The family featured in *The God of Small Things* repeatedly violates the classifications delineated by society. In Foucault's sense, those violations enforce the operating systems of power, rather than resisting them. Rahel explains the family's problem; "[t]his difficulty that their family had with classification ran much deeper than the jam-jelly question... they all broke the rules. They all crossed into forbidden territory. They all tampered with the laws that lay down who should be loved and how. And how much" (Roy 31). In their adult years when Estha and Rahel are reunited, the link between them is one that Rahel has trouble classifying; "[h]e was a naked stranger met in a chance encounter. He was the one that she had known before Life began... Both things unbearable in their polarity" (Roy 89). Chacko also fails to see the contradiction between his role as the boss of the factory and his desire to "play Comrade! Comrade!" (Roy 116). He was "so busy trying on different costumes that he blurred the battle lines" (Roy 116). Ammu is torn between her role as mother where she loves her children with all of her heart and her role as woman where they are millstones that weigh her down. Even Sophie Mol, in her desire to befriend the twins, denounces the love laws as she, "informed Chacko that even though he was her Real Father, she loved him less than Joe" (180). This refusal to follow the rules of classification is not a true rebellion, as the reason society creates classifications is because violations create opportunities for power to exert itself; rules truly are made to be broken. As a family that fails at classification, the family in *The God of Small Things* has their own niche in society, and reinforces the systems of power that are in play.

Part Five: The Verdict

The reading of the Velutha and Ammu's love as a mere violation, a crime so well within the setup of society that the mechanisms of power immediately start working to punish it, makes one

order if the love between Velutha and Ammu is actually an example, not an event. However, Badiou allows that an event on its own does not create drastic change. In order for an event to have an impact on society as a whole and change the system in which it took place, as Badiou claims it can, those involved in the event must remain faithful to the event. To do so you must “do all that you can to persevere in that which exceeds your perseverance. Persevere in the interruption” (Badiou 47). By changing one’s entire way of life in terms of that event and never relinquishing one’s hold on this new way of seeing things, a subject acquires a new ethic, the ethics of truth, of the Real, rather than the ethics of communication. The ethics of communication is what rules society, because “opinions are the cement of sociality... they are what sustain all human animals” (Badiou 50), and “opinion is the primary material of all communication” (Badiou 51). However, opinion is neither true nor false; it only needs to be communicable. The ethic of truth, on the other hand, is accessible through the encounter of an event. To achieve the ethic of truth you must “never forget what you have encountered” (Badiou 52). For Badiou, to consistently remain faithful to an event is to live an ethic of truth, whereas the rest of society is empty communication, consisting of no truth or falsity.

Ammu and Velutha are true to their love. They act on it, but, most importantly, they stay steady till the end, even when the world has started to crash down around them. Ammu is faithful when she goes to the Inspector and tells him that she wasn’t raped, that she was in love with Velutha and gave herself to him willingly. This is what prompts him to tap her with his baton, to shake her out of her fidelity and get her to act the way she’s supposed to. But Ammu refuses. She grabs hold of what the event means for her and won’t go back for any reason. Badiou suggests that there is a layer of truth that can only be perceived through events, which produce gaping holes in the world as we know it, and that the only way to hang on to that truth is to hold firm and live your

life according to that event. In this sense, the Terror cannot contain the event that took place before. Ammu doesn't try to save face and maintain some dignity or power; she marches straight down to the police station to tell the truth. She doesn't even abandon her love for her family; she leaves her children in their grief and goes where her love leads. Society has the power to kill Velutha, but society cannot determine truth, and cannot convince Ammu to give up on the truth that pierced her consciousness in the form of the event.

When speaking of Ammu's fidelity, I claimed that fidelity to an event proves that even if society punishes the nonconformists, punishments can't truly contain the event that went before. I also argued that events poke holes in the seemingly flawless structures that rule our day to day lives. The attempt at containment is proof that this flawlessness is an illusion. Jameson describes this phenomenon in terms of faulty codes for interpreting texts. He claims that his goal is to uncover an "interpretive master code" (Jameson 10) which will allow him to evaluate other interpretive codes prevalent in literary and cultural study. By comparing these codes to the master, "a dialectical or totalizing, properly Marxist ideal of understanding" (Jameson 10), he will uncover their flaws and attributes, one aspect of which is "the 'strategies of containment' whereby they are able to project the illusion that their readings are somehow complete and self-sufficient" (Jameson 10). Just as false interpretations use strategies of containment to create the illusion of wholeness and unity, strategies of containment are also used by society to make it look as if the laws in play are the only viable interpretation or representation of truth. That the event in *The God of Small Things* must be contained acknowledges flaws in the system, even apart from the knowledge that the containment only partially succeeds due to the fidelity of the characters. The novel teaches that when people are faithful to events, containment fails; examples are contained, events are not.

The twins offer another example of continuing fidelity. They never let go of the pain and

shame that the Terror brings into their lives. Though they are separated, they grab hold of the truth that is revealed in their portion of the Terror. If events offer glimpses of truth in a world of illusion, then events are gaps in the system that are perceived during mundane daily interactions. Badiou says that events cause an interruption, and that fidelity to the event requires living in that interruption. For the twins, the Terror is one such interruption, a blank space in their otherwise ordered and understandable world. If this is truth, then it is a painful truth for the twins, who “only asked for punishments that fitted their crimes. Not ones that came like cupboards with built-in bedrooms. Not ones that you spent your whole life in, wandering through its maze of shelves” (Roy 309). Their fidelity consists of emptiness in one twin and silence in the other, and they live in this cavernous maze of an interruption for the rest of their lives. If the love is an event for Ammu and Velutha, and the Terror is an event for Rahel and Estha, then these events change the world because of the subjects’ fidelity. They live truthfully, despite the fact that the rest of their society continues to have the power, and even to exert it over them. Ultimately, it doesn’t matter if society slaps them back down, because by exercising fidelity no matter what, they prove that society’s power and control are indeed limited.

The novel explores the moment when Velutha and Ammu fall in love as both an event and an example. On one hand, this event is described in cataclysmic terms, and quite clearly changes the lives of those involved. Conversely, we see that society is prepared for this sort of violation in the smooth distribution of punishment. However, the characters refuse to surrender their way of life to the norms of the time. They hold onto the truths that they found in the event that History didn’t want to occur, and society is unprepared for the fidelity of those involved. Those who are faithful to events are dangerous in that they’re making up the rules as they go along. “Each faithful truth-process is an entirely invented immanent break with the situation” (Badiou 44), and therefore,

because the faithful subject is living in terms of that immanent break with the rest of society and is inventing the way to do so, his or her actions cannot be understood by the portion of society that was not witness to the event. Baby Kochamma doesn't understand Rahel and Estha upon their return to Ayemenem; her domestic power is useless because she cannot comprehend the way in which they have internalized the Terror.

Jameson says, "History is what hurts, it is what refuses desire and sets inexorable limits to individual as well as collective praxis, which its 'ruses' turn into grisly and ironic reversals of their overt intention" (Jameson 102); no matter what people do, history will do with them as it pleases. This novel argues a different relation between human agency and history. Events, which go against the ruling ideas of the time and blur the distinctions that have developed over time in discourse, can change the ways of thinking of humans, can change their way of life, and even change society itself through fidelity. Ammu and Velutha know that they will be punished for their fidelity, that "for each tremor of pleasure they would pay with an equal measure of pain" (Roy 317), but they choose to remain loyal to the event, thus proving society's inability to fully contain their love. They "made the unthinkable thinkable and the impossible really happen" (Roy 242). It is their fidelity to their love and the fidelity of the twins to their grief that show how events can threaten the ultimate control of society, the control over how people think, whether they can conceive of alternatives to the current laws and classifications. The god of small things, then, is the god of events; "a god for whom no master-narratives exist; a god who exists, if at all, in the scattered shards of history, the ruins of memory; a god who promises a certain freedom, but only at a terrible price" (Punter 206). By making the love of Velutha and Ammu a life-changing event that occurs within the daily personal realm, Roy argues her theory of history. Roy successfully illustrates that even those

without power can effect history in their day to day lives by living according to the truths revealed through events, which poke holes in the illusion of flawlessness of society's structure.

In my reading, *The God of Small Things* is not a tribute to the reign of power and immutable forces, such as Roy's History, which steal human agency and run the world as they see fit. Nor does the novel strictly adhere to Foucaultian or Marxist conceptions of history and agency. Rather, the novel depicts a world in which human agency can make a difference, can *make history*. The novel's central argument is that the forbidden love that illustrates the cohesiveness of class and sexuality matters immensely. In this, her first novel, Roy tries to acknowledge the darkness in the world without surrendering unto that darkness the light of hope that is human agency. Roy shows us the formidable power structures at work in society. The darkest point of the novel is the account of History's Henchmen at work in the History House, where two small children "heard the thud of wood on flesh. Boot on bone. On teeth. The muffled grunt when a stomach is kicked in. The muted crunch of skull on cement. The gurgle of blood on a man's breath when his lung is torn by the jagged end of a broken rib" (Roy 292). But Roy doesn't leave us with the broken and battered Velutha. The last chapter of the novel supplies the missing piece, the wonder that enveloped the world when Velutha and Ammu met at the riverbank on the night of the afternoon of that fateful glance. Roy leaves us with the lovers; "Behind them the river pulsed through the darkness, shimmering like wild silk. Yellow bamboo wept. Night's elbows rested on the water and watched them" (Roy 317), and we watch, too, as "she danced for him. On that boat-shaped piece of earth. She lived... and on Ammu's Road (to Age and Death) a small, sunny meadow appeared" (Roy 319). The last word the lovers speak symbolizes the "small thing" that is their love, and it is a word of hope: "'Naaley. ' Tomorrow.'" (Roy 321).

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